Edward Said - Deir Yassin Recalled

Al-Ahram Weekly, 17-23 April 1997

To reduce the Palestinian actuality to nil, to efface the Palestinian people as a people with legitimate rights was the true purpose of the horrors of Deir Yassin, and it is a purpose that continues to set the Zionist agenda to this day.

My parents sisters and I left Palestine for the last time during the latter part of December 1947; in addition to the family business in Palestine of which he was a partner, my father was in charge of the Egyptian branch, so in effect when we left Jerusalem for Cairo we were returning to somewhere familiar, to a home, schools, friends, etc. The rest of my extended family was not so lucky. By mid-spring of 1948 every one of them on both sides, paternal and maternaluncles, aunts, cousinshad become refugees scattered throughout the Arab world. Most went to Jordan, a few to Lebanon, my paternal aunt and most of her grown children to Egypt, where they joined my father in the business of which they too were partners.

I recall quite vividly that though I was twelve at the time, I was neither told much about nor was able fully to grasp the nature of the catastrophe that had overtaken us as a people; I am not even sure that I thought of us as members of a specific people. Our household was totally depoliticized, although we came to feel the difficulties of Palestinian refugees in Egypt as somehow involving us. This was natural enough since I remember it was quite common to see relatives in very reduced circumstances, worrying about how they were going to pay the rent, find jobs, and so on. During the course of 1948, however, it dawned on me imperfectly and incompletely, I am sure, what a true misfortune had befallen Arab Palestine.

No small role was played in this growing awareness of the question of Palestine by the fragmentary reports I heard around our dinner table in Cairo during the spring and summer of 1948 about the Deir Yassin massacre, which took place on 9 April 1948. My aunt and her daughter in particular had been in Jerusalem (about four kilometres away from Deir Yassin) at the time, but had heard only the desperate and horrified accounts of the ordeal of those 250 men, women and children innocents all of them ruthlessly murdered in cold blood by "the Jews", as everyone called them. More than any single occurrence in my memory of that difficult period it was Deir Yassin that stood out in all its awful, and intentional fearsomeness, the stories of rape, of children with their throats slit, mothers disemboweled, and the like. They gripped the imagination, as they were designed to do, and they impressed a young boy many miles away with the mystery of such bloodthirsty, and seemingly gratuitous violence against Palestinians whose only crime seemed to be that they were there. Yet it was not until almost a decade later that I was able to understand the context and real meaning of what happened at Deir Yassin.

It used to be thought that the massacre was a deliberate but somehow random terrorist incident planned and executed by Menachem Begin's Irgun. What we now know is that according to Israeli historian Benny Morris the "operation" at Deir Yassin was not only abetted and participated in by the Haganah, but was part of an over-all Zionist plan (Dalet, first written about by Walid Khalidi) to systematically empty Palestine of its Arab population. Deir Yassin, because of the sheer horror of its murderousness had, says Morris in his book The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949, "the most lasting effect of any single event of the war in precipitating the flight of Arab villagers from Palestine" (p. 113).

The fact of course is that it was not just "Arab villagers" who left for that and similar reasons, but two-thirds of the entire Palestinian population, about 800,000 people. Recent extremely important work by the Palestinian-Israeli scholar Nur Masalha on the concept of "transfer" in Zionist thought shows how persistently the Zionists imagined, planned for, and implemented programmes to rid their "promised land' of the native people. His first book, which treats Zionist ideology from 1882 to 1948 is Expulsion of the Palestinians; his second, and only just published, is a terrifyingly graphic account of the period between 1949 and 1996: A Land Without a People: Israel, Transfer and the Palestinians, 1949-96.

The material he presents in his second volume is even more compelling since not only is it based mainly on Zionist sources, but it shows how deeply, how thoroughly and how determinedly Israeli politicians, military men, and intellectuals continued well after 1948 to pursue the same policy of trying to get rid of the Palestinians, either by actual transfer, by massacre (as in Kafr Qassim), or by forcing submission on them as a whole. The entire idea has always therefore been to reduce the Palestinian actuality to nil, to efface Palestinians as a people with legitimate rights, to render them alien in their own land. And indeed Israel has so far succeeded in its own mind. The Oslo peace process, the settlements, the arrogant defiance of Netanyahu: these all derive in a straight line from events like Deir Yassin and the idea that made Deir Yassin into the massacre it was.

Yet the question remains: why has Deir Yassin mostly been forgotten, and why has 1948 been removed from the peace agenda by Palestinian leaders and intellectuals? After all we are dealing with Israeli Jews who constantly, and justly, remind the world of the evils of anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, and of the reparations thereby made necessary. In his book Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, the Haitian historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot discusses how in Western accounts of the Haitian revolution of 1798 the Westerners always seem finally destined to win, the Haitians to lose, in addition, most accounts of that period simply ignore what happened in Haiti. He refers to "the silencing of the Haitian revolution," which he says happens because the narrative of Western global domination makes the defeat of native people seem inevitable, unless there is an attempt by native peoples to retell the history of Western domination and thus provoke "a fundamental rewriting of world history."

As Arabs and Palestinians we are very far from that stage. Our history is written by outsiders, and we have conceded the battle in advance. Our leaders negotiate as if from a tabula rasa. The agenda is America's and Israel's. And we continue to concede, and concede more and concede again, not only in the present, but also in the past and in the future. Collective memory is a people's heritage, but also its energy: it does not merely sit there inertly, but it must be activated as part of a people's identity and sense of its own prerogative. To recall Deir Yassin is not just to dwell on past disasters, but to understand who we are and where we are going. Without it we are simply lost, as indeed it seems we really are.